

Azalea Pruning Done Right



Improperly Pruned



Properly Pruned

Photos: By Beth Weidner

Beth Weidner is the Park Manager at Maclay Gardens State Park and a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/>

We're just past that time of year that our town is transformed into an enchantment of springtime blooms. Azaleas are a large part of that magnificent springtime show. If your azaleas have grown a little too large, now is the time of year to prune them so that they will be ready for next year's display. Here are tips for pruning the right way.

Tip #1: Put away the hedge shears! Azaleas should never be sheared with hedge trimmers. While this may be fast, it results in undesirable effects, both in plant growth and in display of next year's flowers.

Azaleas have growth buds all along their stems. Pruning along a stem stimulates a growth response, usually resulting in five or six new branches arising a few inches below the cut. Shearing causes this response at the same point on all stems, resulting in a condition called "whiffle cut." Flowers look as though they're stuck all over the outside of the plant in a most unnatural way.

Tip # 2: The correct tool to use is hand pruners, freshly sharpened. Grasp a group of branches and begin cutting one stem at a time, about a foot below where you are holding. It is not necessary to cut back to another branch as azaleas have growth buds all along the stem. But you should stagger cuts so they're made at differing heights. Leave foliage to hide cut stems rather than leaving stubs sticking up above the leaves. About every third to fifth cut should be made more deeply, stimulating new growth near the plant's center. Over years, this results in gradual rejuvenation, keeping plants healthier.

It's okay if deep cuts create holes as they'll quickly fill in with new growth. And it's okay to prune lower than you might think, as plants will quickly grow back to size. Azaleas should only be pruned once a year, so cut off enough to make it last.

Tip #3: The time is now! Azalea pruning must be completed before the fourth of July, as that's when next year's flower buds begin to form. Later pruning would cut off next year's flowers – ouch!

Tip #4: Rejuvenation of old, overgrown plants can be done in 2 ways – the quick and dirty method or the careful and pretty method. Quick and dirty may be the option if you have a great many plants. This method involves cutting all stems back to about knee high or slightly lower, shaping somewhat so that the center stems are a bit higher than the outer stems. Some plants won't survive such severe pruning, and all may take several years to completely recover.

The preferred method is to carefully follow large stems back into the heart of the plant, cutting off at the junction with another large branch and taking out about one third of the main stems. Remaining branches are pruned as in tip #2. This work goes quickly, as much is removed with the first few cuts, making it easy to see how to do the remaining work. Over a period of three years this results in a gradual reduction in the size of the plant, while maintaining health.

###